New documentary may solidify TJ's case for Hall induction, at last

An important vote is coming in November 2024. Its outcome could right a significant wrong.

Yes, when the Baseball Hall of Fame's Classic Baseball Era Committee members consider eight candidates for induction, Terre Haute native Tommy John could, at last, become enshrined at Cooperstown, New York. That's John's next chance to earn that elusive plaque alongside the best in baseball history. If selected, he would accept induction in the summer of 2025 at age 82.

He belongs in Cooperstown.

In the days following the 2024 World Series, the Classic Baseball Era Committee will consider eight nominees — former major-league players, managers, umpires and executives "whose greatest contributions to the game were realized prior to 1980" — for Hall of Fame induction, Craig Muder, director of communications at the Hall, said Thursday. The candidates are those passed over by the primary Hall selection body, the Baseball Writers Association of America.

John, a lefty pitcher who won 288 games for six teams from 1963 to '89, was on the Baseball Writers' ballot from 1995 through 2009, but never received more than 31% of the vote. Inductees must get 75% of the writers' votes. Since his candidacy through the Baseball Writers expired, John has been on the ballot with the Hall's veterans committees, yet still hasn't gotten in.

Two recent developments strengthen John's chances.

Turn to BENNETT, A5

Former Major League Baseball pitcher Tommy John (right) gestures toward Brian Dorsett (left) as Rex general manager Bruce Rosselli (center) reminds the crowd that Dorsett caught for John during their pro careers before the start of the Rex game Wednesday against Danville at Bob Warn Field.

Tribune-Star/Joseph C. Garza

MARK

BENNETT

JOHN

Bennett

Continued from A1

First, one of John's contemporaries — fellow former lefty pitcher Jim Kaat — was inducted last year with a similar career resume. Kaat finished a 25-year career from 1959 to '83 with a 283237 record, a 3.45 earned-run average and three All-Star appearances. John amassed a record of 288-231 with a 3.34 ERA, four All-Star appearances and a 2-1 mark in three World Series.

Second, a new documentary will soon shine a global spotlight on John's life story. Winter State Entertainment has been crafting "Tommy John: The Bionic Man" since March and is filming prime elements of the upcoming 90-minute movie this week in Terre Haute. The crew filmed John's visit to a Terre Haute Rex summer collegiate league game at Bob Warn Field on Wednesday, "Tommy John Night." Director Nick Hagen and his team are also capturing interviews and footage of John touring his old stomping grounds in his hometown, such as the former Gerstmeyer High School gym and the sandlot diamond at Spencer F. Ball Park. The documentary aims to illuminate John's most famous feat, returning to top big-league form after a revolutionary arm surgery in the middle of his career.

The film also helps John's Hall of Fame cause, Hagen said Tuesday.

"Yes, 100 percent," Hagen said of his backing for John's induction. "That conversation needs to be readdressed and reopened. I would love to assist that Hall of Fame push in any way I can." He expects the documentary to be released on streaming platforms next summer.

A pivotal moment in John's life happened on July 17, 1974. John felt a tinge and pop in his left arm while pitching for the Los Angeles Dodgers against the Montreal Expos that night. He'd torn his ulnar collateral ligament. Most pitchers who suffered that injury, up to that point, saw their careers end. John prepared for that destiny, figuring he'd become a car salesman at buddy Bob McClelland's Chrysler dealership back in Terre Haute.

Dodgers team physician Dr. Frank Jobe had another idea. He proposed an unprecedented, untested procedure to replace John's torn ligament with the same UCL from his right arm. John agreed. Jobe performed the landmark surgery on Sept. 25, 1974. It worked. John dutifully followed a designed-from-scratch rehab plan through 1975 and returned for the 1976 season.

From there, all John did was win another 164 games, never missing a starting pitching assignment from age 32 to 46. That included three 20-win seasons and a sparkling 2.65 ERA in World Series starts for the Dodgers and New York Yankees.

Critics say John's 288 wins came because of his longevity, playing 26 seasons. Well, yeah. And, what's wrong with that? Besides, John wasn't a hanger-on. At age 44, he recorded a slick 13-6 record in 1987 for George Steinbrenner's Yankees. (Current Yankees ace Gerrit Cole, age 32, posted a 13-8 record last season, while under a nine-year, $348-million contract. Just for perspective.) At 45, John pitched 176 innings for those same Yankees.

Plus, John still awaits Hall induction only because he fell 12 victories shy of the coveted 300-win mark. Every pitcher with 300 or more victories is enshrined in Cooperstown, except steroid-era standout Roger Clemens. For that matter, every pitcher with 288 wins or more is in the Hall, except for Clemens and 19th-century hurler Bobby Matthews.

John missed a full season and a half recovering from a surgery no one had ever endured, with no roadmap for recovery. Hall voters have rightly taken into account other greats who sacrificed chunks of their careers while serving in the military, or were locked out of the majors because of baseball's racist pre-Jackie Robinson color barrier. John should be given similar consideration.

His success after that landmark surgery paved the way for 562 other majorleaguers — included among 2,273 ballplayers at all levels, high school, college and the minor leagues — whose careers were saved by a procedure that bears his name, Tommy John surgery.

If John hadn't shined so greatly, that surgery would've been considered a failure and may never have happened again.

As stated here before, the surgery is famous because of John, not vice versa.

Last year, when Kaat was inducted into the Baseball Hall, he said, "I think it's a travesty that Tommy is not [in the Hall of Fame]. Is there any pitcher more famous than Tommy John? He won more games after surgery than before surgery."

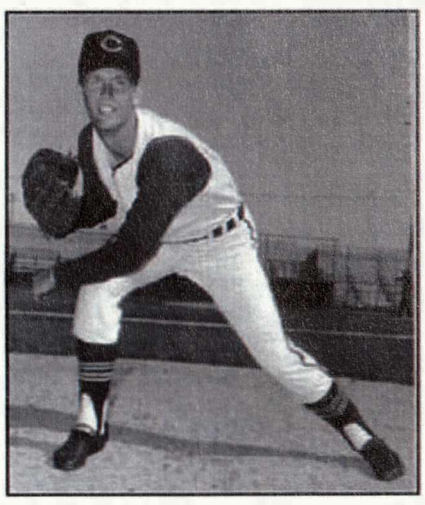
Kaat's words caught the ear of Hagen, inspiring the new John documentary.

"The door [for John's induction] should be open at this point," Hagen said Tuesday, the eve of a week of Terre Haute filming. "We shouldn't have this benchmark [of 300 wins], which seems silly at this point."

Of course, it's John's accomplished life itself that validates his Hall credentials. John believes audiences will see that through Hagen's film.

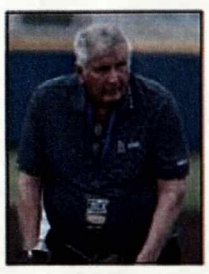
"I think with what I've done in my life, there's a lot to be said," John said Tuesday in Terre Haute. "And I think Nick will do a good job of bringing that out to the front."

Mark Bennett can be reached at 812-231-4377 or mark.bennett@tribstar.com.



Then-rookie pitcher Tommy John of the Cleveland Indians poses prior to a workout during spring training in March 1963 at Hi Corbett Field in Tucson, Ariz.

Courtesy of Cleveland Indians Archives



Terre Haute native and former Major League Baseball pitcher Tommy John acknowledges the applause from the crowd before the start of the Rex game Wednesday at Bob Warn Field.

Tribune-Star/Joseph C. Garza

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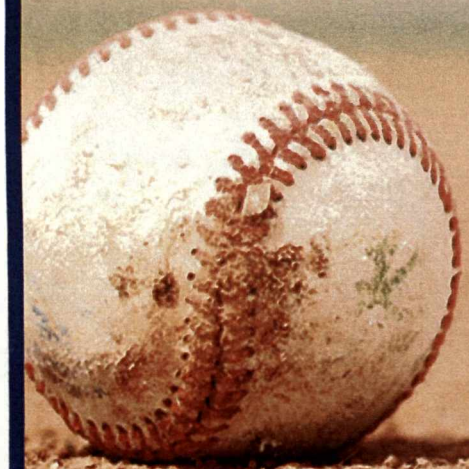

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Tommy John

Field Dedication

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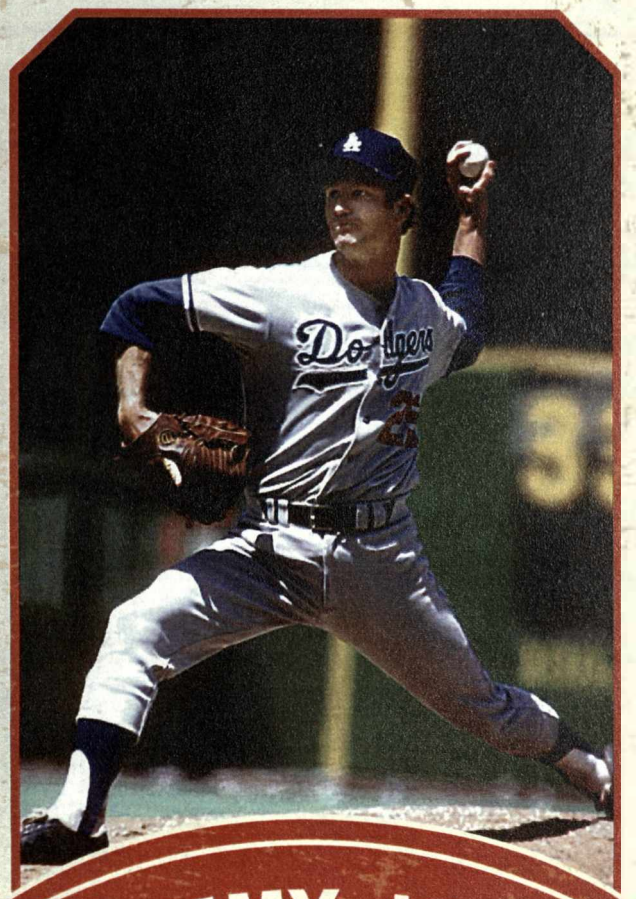


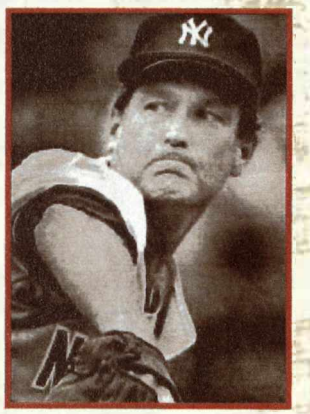
TOMMY JOHN

Field Dedication

October 24th, 2013

Terre Haute, Indiana

Thomas Edward John



Position: Pitcher

Bats: Right **Throws:** Left

Height & Weight: 6'3" & 180 lb.

Born: May 22, 1943
Terre Haute, Indiana

Graduated: Gerstmeyer Technical High School, Valedictorian

Home Baseball Field: Spencer Ball Park

Signed: By the Cleveland Indians as an amateur free agent in 1961 (Age 18)

MLB Debut: September 6, 1963 (Age 20)

World Series: (2) Won both games, as a pitcher

4X All Star: 1968, 1978, 1979, 1980

1976: Hutch Award, NL Comeback Player of the Year

1981: Lou Gehrig Memorial Award

Teams: Indians/ White Sox/ Dodgers/ Angels/ As/ Yankees, 1963 - 1989

Agents: Bob Cohen and Kim Berger

Final Game: May 25, 1989 (Age 46)

Tommy John Field Dedication Dinner

TONIGHT'S STARTING LINEUP

6:30 PM Cocktail Hour • Start of Silent Auction
7:00 PM Dinner
8:00 PM Silent Auction Completed
8:30 PM Start of Program

FAST BALL WELCOME

Mike King, Master of Ceremonies

MID RELIEF SPEAKERS

Reflection, Presentation
Bruce Rosselli, Director of Recreation, Terre Haute Parks

Recognition of Service, Plaque & Field Presentation
Mayor Duke Bennett & Superintendent Eddie Bird

Presentation, Sagamore of the Wabash Award
Bob Heaton, State Representative District 46

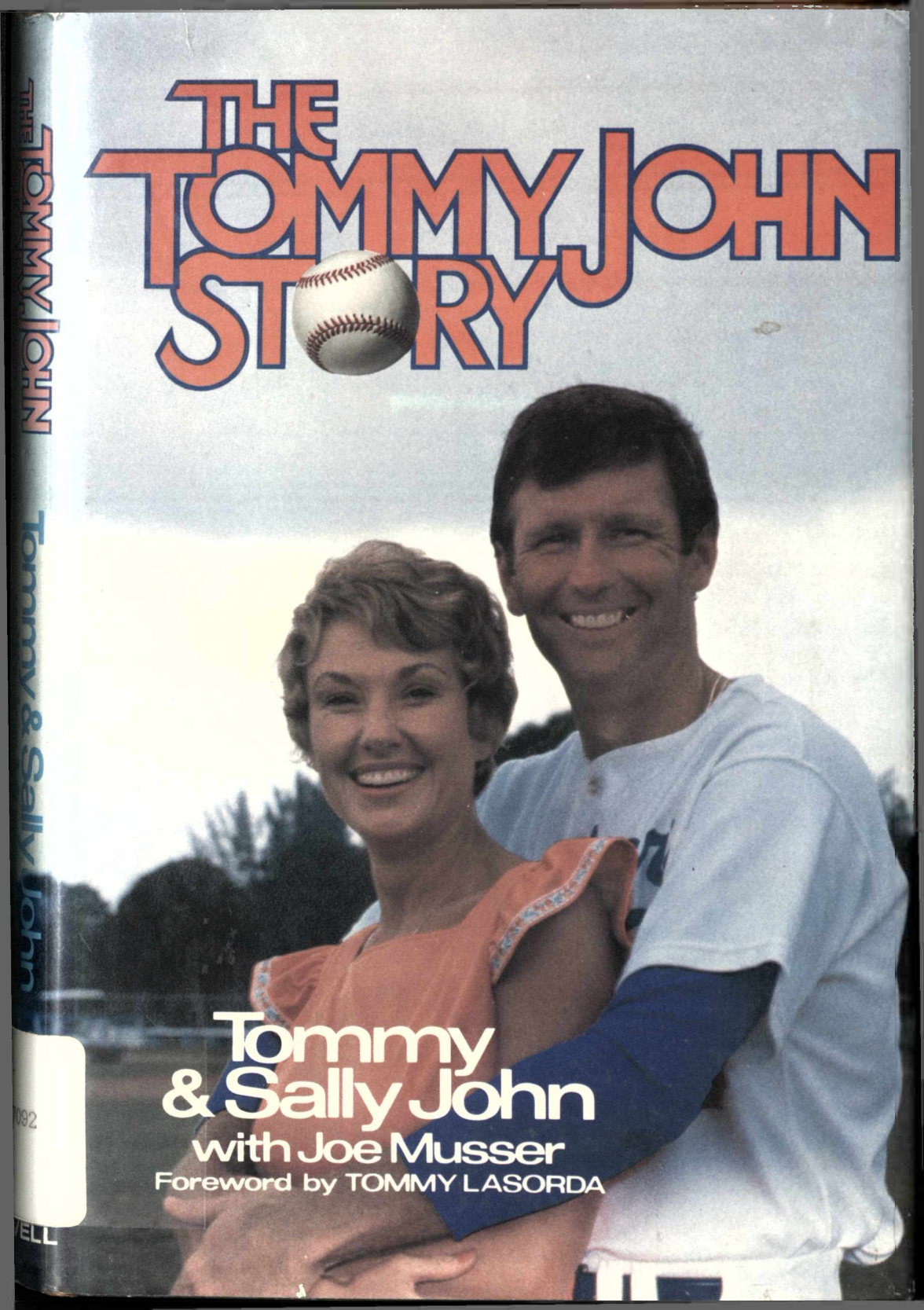
Introduction of Special Guest Speaker
Mike King

SPECIAL GUEST SPEAKER
Mr. Tommy John, *Former Major League Pitcher, 26 years, 4 Time All Star, Two World Series Game Winning Pitcher, & Terre Haute Native*

CLOSING PITCHER REMARKS

Mike King

THE TOMMY JOHN STORY



Tommy & Sally John

with Joe Musser

Foreword by TOMMY LASORDA

THE TOMMY JOHN STORY
Tommy & Sally John

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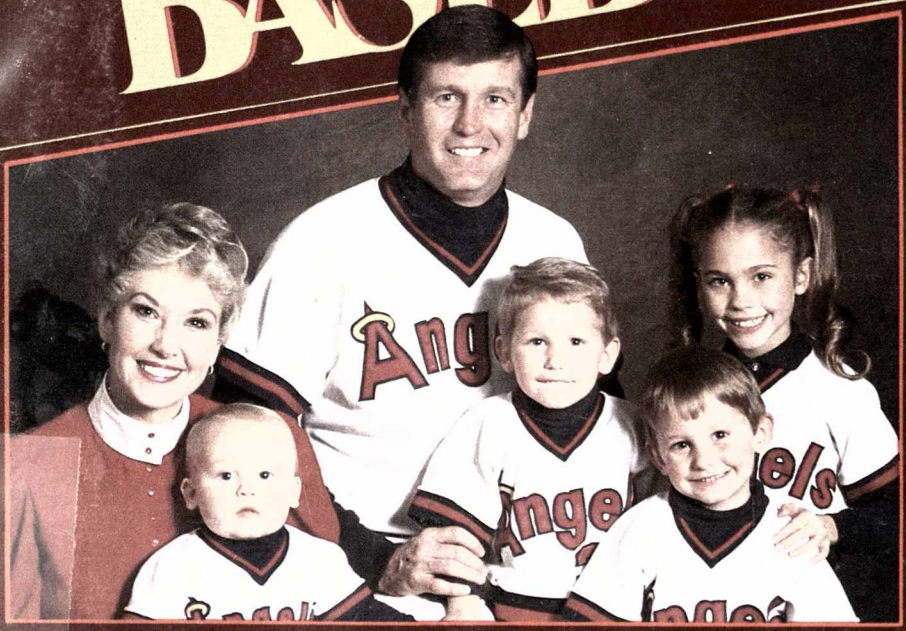
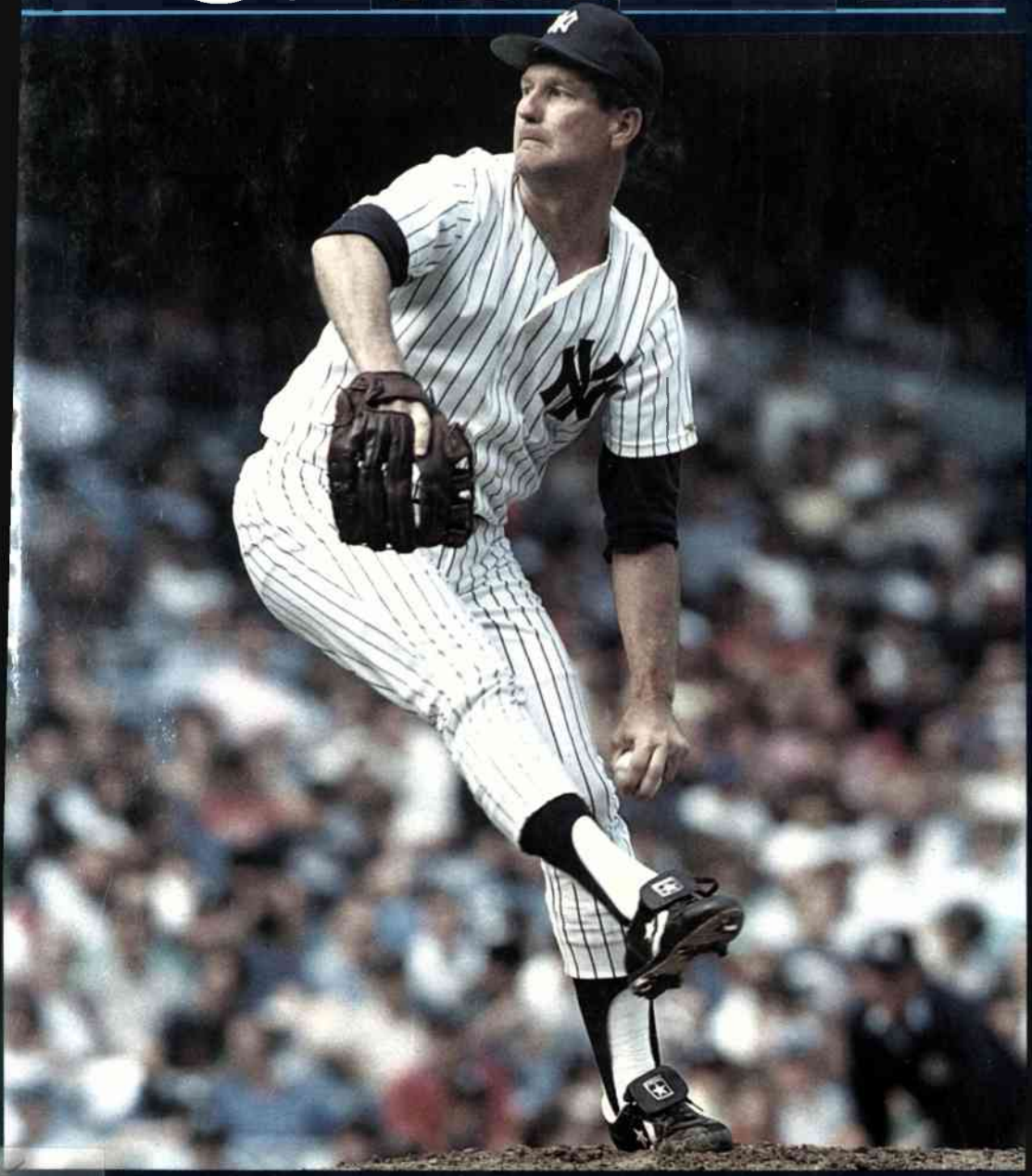
VELL

THE SALLY AND TOMMY JOHN STORY

OUR LIFE IN BASEBALL



T.J. MY 26 YEARS IN BASEBALL



TOMMY JOHN

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